

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

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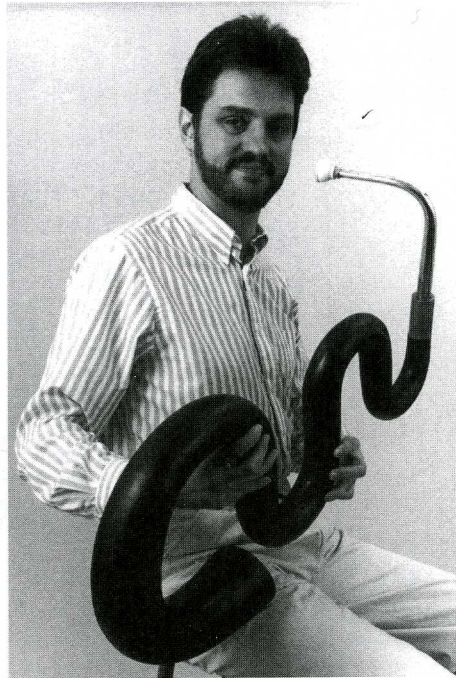
Stephen Wick and the Informed Approach

by Clifford Bevan

Any orchestral tubist will recognize a program consisting of music by Richard Strauss in the first half and Brahms 4th Symphony in the second half as a good evening's planning by someone in the management. Thanks to this lucky conjunction in a concert at London's Royal Festival Hall back in the spring, I was at last able to catch up with the phenomenally busy Stephen Wick. His stimulating thoughts were more than a substitute for being a Philharmonia trombonist that night, finding ways of not falling off the chair before the first exposed entry following three tacet movements.

Wick might just possibly have become one of those players himself, since his father was London Symphony Orchestra principal trombone, author of one of the best brass-playing handbooks, designer of mouthpieces and mutes, Denis Wick—obviously a strong influence around the home. And, yes, Steve did begin his brass playing as a trombonist before deciding to become a musician and taking up tuba instead around the age of 13. He says there never really was any doubt in his mind that he wanted to become an orchestral tubist once he had experienced the pleasures of providing the foundation to the brass section of the National Youth Orchestra (NYO) of Great Britain. His tutor had once occupied the same NYO chair: John Fletcher, who with satisfying symmetry had himself taken lessons from Denis Wick.

There is another even more striking similarity between Steve Wick and John Fletcher: exceptionally for U.K. players, neither studied at music college. When the matter came up for consideration, Fletch



advised against it and Steve went off instead to read Music at the University of Surrey. Situated in Guilford, some 30 miles south of London, much of Surrey's approach to music was considered revolutionary at the time, with courses in performance and recording techniques taking place alongside more traditional activities. (It needs to be remembered that not many years earlier, it was possible to obtain a music degree in a conveniently large number of British universities without the need to be able actually to play so much as a note on any kind of instrument.)

Signs that Steve wasn't going to run smoothly along pre-ordained career tracks appeared when he took a two-year sabbatical in the midst of his academic work to fill the post of tuba with the Oslo Philharmonic. He ultimately returned to Guildford and simultaneously began freelance work in London. On graduating he found that he was already making a

living in the lucrative recording session scene of the 1970s. He admits to being totally overwhelmed by the talent surrounding him on such recordings as those for *The Man Who Would Be King*. "The orchestra was full of stars," he still enthuses. "People like [hornist] Alan Civil were sitting only yards away!"

Wick's involvement in early music wasn't even something he thought about: it just happened. "There's such a continuing tradition here," he explains, "with people like New College Choir in Oxford who've been singing it since the same music was contemporary, there didn't really seem any need to take positive steps to get involved." He bought LPs of the London Cornett & Sackbut Ensemble just as he bought recordings of other music he enjoyed. He also bought an ophicleide from Tony Bingham having heard the attractive sounds Alan Lumsden could produce from the instrument, and over a period taught himself to play it. In the meantime, the early music movement was rapidly fast-forwarding from J. S. Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to that landmark Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique* recording made by Roger Norrington in 1989.

Wick remembers the day the phone rang, and subsequently the tremendous amount of preparation he and Steve Saunders, playing the other ophicleide part, did before the sessions. "We were all so aware of the high standards elsewhere in the brass," he says. "We just had to work away together, teaching ourselves how to do it. The whole exploit was like an experiment, and we felt like pioneers." But once having done it, the sheer exhilaration of playing early music took over.

He acknowledges the Svengali-like role of Norrington. "He was the guiding light, and he was quite superb. It wasn't just a matter of playing the right notes, but of getting right down into the music through

